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ABSTRACT

When a school district has made the decision to close a school, criteria must be developed for selecting the school to be closed. These criteria help in making a sound decision and in explaining that decision to the public. One way of approaching the development of decision criteria is to decide on the main reason the district is closing a school, then let that influence the selection of criteria and the weight given to each. Most districts use three or fewer decision criteria, the three most-used criteria being, in order of frequency, enrollment, the age of the school building, and racial desegregation. The six major categories of possible closure criteria are enrollment, building factors, the educational environment of the school, operating costs, transportation costs, and educational program costs. The next step is to gather data about each school and then compare the schools on each criterion to find the best candidate for closure, thus helping to bring objectivity to a controversial and emotional situation. Included are a sample checklist for making an inventory of each school, a list of the decision criteria discussed in this report, and a brief list of references. (DCS)

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DECISION CRITERIA FOR SCHOOL CLOSURE: A LITERATURE REVIEW

by

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DECISION CRITERIA FOR SCHOOL CLOSURE

One of the most difficult challenges faced by a school district is the decision to close one of its schools. Once that decision has been made, another formidable hurdle lies ahead: deciding which school to close. An important step in the process is the development of criteria for selecting the school to be closed. Such criteria are needed for two main reasons: to help in making a sound decision, and to help explain that decision to the public. In developing the criteria, a school district can benefit from the experiences of others who have gone through the process.

Developing Criteria

The literature stresses the importance of a set of decision criteria as a framework for analyzing and comparing the district's schools. Having a set of standards also takes some of the emotion out of a highly charged situation.[1] The aim in the school closure decision process is to be as objective, explicit, comprehensive and nonpolitical as possible.[2]

One way of approaching the development of decision criteria is to decide on the main reason the district is closing a school.[3] Declining enrollment has spurred most of the school closure decisions of recent years, but within the broad spectrum of declining enrollment effects, one may stand out as the impetus for closing a school. Some of the main factors cited by school districts are operating costs, population shifts within the district, and building inadequacies.[4] Whatever the main reason, it will influence the selection of criteria and the weight given to each in making your decision.[5] It is recommended that the list of decision factors be kept at ten or less, making sure all the factors are relevant to the main purpose for closing a school. Each factor should be fair, practical and as easy to apply as possible.[6]

According to survey data, over 75% of districts which have closed schools have used three or fewer decision criteria. The three most used criteria in order of frequency of use are enrollment, the age of the school building and racial desegregation.[7] The desegregation factor is mainly used in large urban districts containing neighborhoods of varying racial composition. Enrollment would appear to be an obvious standard, but some people believe that since current enrollment is a result of circumstances and not intrinsic to a school site, it is not a fair reason for targeting a particular school for closure.[8]

Major Criteria

The six major categories of possible closure criteria are: enrollment, building factors, the educational environment of the school, maintenance costs, transportation costs and educational program costs.[9] I will briefly review what criteria other school districts have used in each of these six categories, and then cover some other possible criteria.

Enrollment is the criterion used by most districts in deciding which school to close. The enrollment history for the past five years may be studied for each school site. Enrollment projections for the coming five years are also taken into account. Enrollment projections are the most important data for making a school closure decision. The most that can be realistically projected is five years into the future. Forecasting has been called an art rather than a science, because it is not totally reliable. There are several methods for calculating projected enrollment; one of the best known and simplest to use is the "cohort survival" method. This method can be used fairly easily without needing consultants or computers.

The method is based on historical data. It is assumed that most students who start school will progress through the higher grade levels. A

"cohort" is a group of people who have something in common; in this case, the cohort might be the kindergarten students of 1985. By following this group of students to the next grade level, an estimate can be made of how well the cohort will "survive" or remain intact as a group. Some students will move away, go to private schools, be retained in a grade level or be accelerated to a higher level. By studying what happens between one grade level and the next, future enrollment can be estimated.[10]

Another factor to consider is the rate of enrollment decline for each school. This is the percentage of enrollment decline over a given period of years. The number of students who would have to be moved is another factor to consider for each school site.[11] An additional criterion is potential enrollment for the school, based on what is known about the population of the neighborhood.[12]

Another way of considering enrollment is to look at building capacity. The "rated capacity" of each building is the maximum number of students a building can handle.[13] This can be calculated by multiplying the pupil teacher ratio by the number of classrooms in the building. Schools below building capacity, or the school furthest below capacity, may be targets for closure.[14]

Districts may also want to look at enrollment trends for private schools in the area around each school, and at the maturity or growth of each neighborhood.[15] These are a few of the ways districts have taken enrollment into account in making school closure decisions.

School Buildings

The next major category of standards concerns the school building itself. An inventory can be made of each school site, including such data as the age and condition of the building and any additions, the acreage of the school site, the number of rooms, dimensions of rooms and hallways,

parking and the condition of the heating, wiring and plumbing systems.[16] There may be other factors to consider, such as the accessibility of the building for the physically handicapped.[17]

It is important to rate the facilities for their adequacy for program purposes. How well does the physical plant support the educational program? This involves looking at the media center, art room, playground, gym, and other areas of the site.[18]

Another factor to consider is the potential of the building to be used for other purposes, either by the school district or other organizations.[19] Are there other community activities now taking place at the school site?[20] Is the building suitable for dual use: could it house a school and another community program? How flexible are the classroom spaces for other uses? Are the location of the school and the traffic pattern of the area conducive to another use for the building?[21] The potential of the building to be sold or rented may be a major decision factor.[22] If the building were to be maintained as a school, would it need renovation? How much would this cost?[23]

Educational Environment

The next area for decision making concerns the educational environment of each school site. This is an area where qualitative judgment must be used. The district might draw up a description of each school's instructional program, including data on student aptitude and achievement.[24] One important factor is the extent to which closing the school would impact the district's educational program as a whole. Which school's closure would least disrupt the total educational program?[25]

Operational Costs

The maintenance cost for each school is another important

consideration. There are two major factors: operational costs and operational efficiency. The cost of building operation includes water, energy and custodial salaries.[26] One way of looking at maintenance is to calculate the cost of building operation per current student enrolled for each school.[27] Another way to calculate maintenance cost per student is to divide the total maintenance cost for one year by the enrollment capacity for each building. It may be assumed that it would cost about the same to run the building at full capacity as at the current lower enrollment.

Schools whose maintenance costs per student are higher are less efficient to operate.[28] Building efficiency may also be figured by dividing total maintenance costs for one year by the square footage of the building.[29] To look at one specific area such as energy costs or custodial salaries, divide that specific cost for one year by enrollment capacity or square footage.[30]

Transportation

Transportation is a major decision criterion. The transportation impact may be figured by estimating how much added cost there would be if students were moved to other schools from a specific school.[31] It may be important to determine the number and percentage of children who live within walking distance of each school.[32]

Educational Program Costs

Educational program costs may also be taken into consideration. If employees are laid off when a school is closed, their salaries account for sixty to seventy-five percent of the total savings realized by the closure.[33] It is advisable to examine current and projected staffing needs for each school site.[34]

Those are the six major areas that have been considered by other districts. There are additional criteria that do not fit into those six

categories. One is the sense of neighborhood that would be disrupted if a particular school were to be closed. How active is the PTA of each school? What is the racial, ethnic and socioeconomic balance at each school?[35] Another factor is the probable reaction of the community to the closing of each individual school.[36]

Decision Process

Once the district has chosen the criteria to be used in deciding which school to close, the next step is to gather data about each school. Information will be collected about each site for the criteria chosen, such as enrollment trends and maintenance costs. This information may be compiled in a written report about each school. The next step is to compare the schools on each criterion to see which school is the best candidate for closure. There are no absolute standards; this is always a comparative judgment made by looking at the specific schools.

Some districts have made the final decision by weighting or ranking the criteria to give some relative importance over others. This is useful when one of many schools must be closed, or when several schools are being targeted for closure at the same time. If there are only a few candidate schools, weighting or ranking may not be needed. Pages 9 to 10 contain a sample checklist for each school's inventory. This checklist was adapted from one developed by a school district.[37]

The decision criteria discussed in this report are listed on pages 11 to 12. These are some of the most common criteria used by other districts. The decision to close a school is a difficult one, and learning how other districts have handled the task may make the job easier. The criteria chosen will bring objectivity to a controversial and emotional situation. In making an informed and thoughtful decision, the ultimate goal is to

maintain a high quality of education for the district's students.

NOTES

[1]Vincent T. Puleo, Rationale for the Multifactor Method of Elementary School Closing (1981), ERIC Document ED 213 091, p. 4.

[2]Puleo, Rationale, p. 3.

[3]Puleo, Rationale, p. 4.

[4]William M. Gordon and Larry W. Hughes, "Consider This Before Closing Schools," American School Board Journal, February 1980, p. 31.

[5]Puleo, Rationale, p. 4.

[6]Puleo, Rationale, p. 6.

[7]Richard I. Andrews, The Environmental Impact of School Closures (1974), ERIC Document ED 112 521, p. 31.

[8]Hamden (Connecticut) Public Schools, A System of Criteria for Evaluating Elementary School Buildings (1977), ERIC Document ED 161 144, p. 2.

[9]Ben Brodinsky, Declining Enrollment - Closing Schools: Problems and Solutions (Arlington, Va.: American Association of School Administrators, 1981), ERIC Document ED 212 053, p. 10.

[10]Brodinsky, pp. 26-33.

[11]Vincent T. Puleo, Practical Aspects of a Method of Elementary School Closing (1981), ERIC Document ED 213 092, pp. 2-4.

[12]Hamden Public Schools, pp. 23-31.

[13]Gordon and Hughes, p. 31.

[14]Gordon and Hughes, p. 31; Andrews, p. 31; Margaret Fleming, ed., School Closing Policy Report (Cleveland, Ohio: Cleveland Public Schools, 1980), ERIC Document ED 191 931, p. 5.

[15]Brodinsky, p. 28.

[16]Fleming, p. 20.

[17]Brodinsky, p. 28.

[18]Brodinsky, p. 31.

[19]Gordon and Hughes, p. 31.

[20]Brodinsky, p. 26.

[21]Hamden Public Schools, pp. 9-22.

[22]Puleo, Practical Aspects, pp. 2-4.

[23]Hamden Public Schools, pp. 32-36.

[24]Brodinsky, p. 26.

[25]Puleo, Practical Aspects, pp. 2-4.

[26]Puleo, Practical Aspects, pp. 2-4.

[27]Brodinsky, p. 26.

[28]Gordon and Hughes, p. 31.

[29]Puleo, Practical Aspects, pp. 2-4.

[30]Gordon and Hughes, p. 31.

[31]Puleo, Practical Aspects, pp. 2-4.

[32]Hamden Public Schools, pp. 23-31; Brodinsky, p. 31.

[33]Puleo, Practical Aspects, pp. 2-4.

[34]Brodinsky, p. 26.

[35]Hamden Public Schools, pp. 23-31.

[36]Puleo, Practical Aspects, pp. 2-4.

[37]Hamden Public Schools, pp. 43-45.

SCHOOL CLOSING DECISION CHECKLIST

Adapted from A System of Criteria for Evaluating Elementary School Buildings, Hamden (Connecticut) Public Schools, 1977, ERIC Document ED 161 144.

I. EDUCATIONAL

- A. Site suitability
  - 1. Location
    - a. Zoning
    - b. Traffic
      - 1) Average cars per hour
      - 2) Closeness
    - c. Air quality
    - d. Aesthetic appeal
  - 2. Site itself
    - a. Size
    - b. Aesthetic appeal
- B. Classroom space flexibility
  - 1. Accomodates well:
    - a. Small groups
    - b. Basic class sizes
    - c. Multiples
  - 2. Desirable renovation
- C. Classroom space per pupil
  - 1. Total classroom square footage
  - 2. Revised capacity
- D. Auxiliary facilities
  - 1. Media center
    - a. Space
    - b. Light
    - c. Accessibility
  - 2. Art room
    - a. Square footage
    - b. Light
  - 3. Music room
    - a. Square footage
    - b. Acoustics
    - c. Light
  - 4. Usable outdoor space
    - a. Square footage
    - b. Recreation
    - c. Environmental education
  - 5. Cafeteria
    - a. Square footage
    - b. Light
    - c. Traffic flow
  - 6. Gymnasium
    - a. Square footage
    - b. Equipment
    - c. Light

(continued)

E. Building capacity
    1. Capacity
    2. Percentage lost
F. Suitability for dual use
    1. Nature of services/school
        a. Feasible in school hours
        b. Feasible only after school
    2. Problems of dual use
        a. Space conflicts
        b. Traffic
        c. Hallway congestion
        d. Lavatories
        e. Regulations

II. COMMUNITY IMPACT

A. Walkers
    1. Number
    2. Percentage
B. Sense of neighborhood
    1. Parent years in area
    2. Residents who went there
    3. Years as a polling place
    4. Special programs
    5. Non-school activities
    6. Neighborhood association
    7. Active PTA
C. Potential enrollment
D. Racial, ethnic, socioeconomic balance
E. Alternate use

III. FINANCIAL

A. Per pupil costs
    1. Costs (all but instructional)
    2. Building capacity
B. Renovation costs
C. Marketability

POSSIBLE CLOSURE CRITERIA DISCUSSED IN THIS REPORT

Enrollment

History (past five years)
Projections (next five years)
Rate of decline
Number of students to be displaced
Potential enrollment based on population
Building capacity
Private schools
Maturity of neighborhood

School Buildings

Age
Condition
Acreage
Number of rooms
Dimensions of rooms and hallways
Heating
Wiring
Plumbing
Accessibility for handicapped
Adequacy for educational program
Potential for other uses
Potential for dual uses
Flexibility of classroom spaces
Location
Traffic patterns
Marketability (sale or rent)
Renovation needed (including cost)

Educational Environment

Instructional program
Student aptitude
Student achievement
Place in district program

Operational Costs

Water
Energy
Custodial salaries
Cost per student enrolled
Cost for one year/building capacity
Cost for one year/square footage

(continued)

Transportation

Cost of moving students
Number within walking distance
Percentage within walking distance

Educational Program Costs

Salaries (certificated and classified)
Current staffing needs
Projected staffing needs

REFERENCES

Andrews, Richard I. The Environmental Impact of School Closures. 1974. ERIC Microfiche Document ED 112 521.

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Puleo, Vincent T. Practical Aspects of a Method of Elementary School Closing. 1981. ERIC Microfiche Document ED 213 092.

Puleo, Vincent T. Rationale for the Multifactor Method of Elementary School Closing. 1981. ERIC Microfiche Document ED 213 091.

These and other resources on school closing are available from the SMERC Information Center at (415) 363-5447.

This paper is intended as an unbiased review of the literature and does not reflect positions or opinions of the San Mateo County Office of Education.

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